THE VULNERABILITY OF GOD
Isaiah 49:1-4, 50:4-9
I Corinthians 1:22-29
December 16, 1973

John M. Buchanan
Bethany Presbyterian Church
Lafayette, Indiana

James Wharton, Professor at Austin Theological Seminary tells a story out of his own experience about the time a drunk stole the show from Mary and Joseph. The young people in his church were staging an outdoor tableau as their contribution to the Christmas Season. They had hired a brace of sheep and a donkey, and nearly broke their necks hanging a star thirty five feet up on the church building. They had even disguised the masonry with an enormous blue triangle of drapery that spread downward from the star to suggest a Palestinian night sky. In the tableau Mary and Joseph stood perfectly still: the shepherds and Wise Men had the only moving parts.

Along came a drunk - who stood on the sidewalk viewing this scene and competing with the electronic carols with his applause and compliments. But then he decided to take a closer look. So he joined the tableau. He stuck his head under the lean-to and stared down at the doll in the manger illuminated by a hidden flashlight. He was touched - great tears streamed down his nose. Unfortunately he was also belligerent, and rejected the whispered suggestion from Joseph that he ought to move on. Fianlly the three Wise Men arrived and ushed the man away.

That is an example of the tear=jerking sentimentality that Christmas brings out in us. And perhaps we Christians are to blame. Our entire culture responds to ~~can identify with~~ the popular elements of Christmas: the tender love of a mother, the awestruck and adoring father; the gentle livestock. That's what Advent and Christmas is about, and the church perhaps is guilty of reinforcing nothing more than a superficial sentimentality, and neglecting to tell the whole story: the story of God walking among us, incarnate in Jesus whom we know as the Christ.

I talked to my brother this week who is village manager of Liberty, New York; a resort town in which the majority of residents are Jewish. He was telling me that because of the energy crisis they decided not to turn the Christmas lights on this year and that the biggest reaction came from the Jewish Community. They were trying to be kind and sympathetic and didn't want their Christian friends to be denied the celebration of Jesus' birth. They couldn't understand my brother's continuing contention that the lights had little of anything to do with a Christian Christmas. ~ Pres. Elder.

Now, I would have you understand that I am not putting down nativity scenes and Christmas trees. This lovely season has a magic all its own: love that is restrained bottled up all year is turned loose: people do seem kinder, gentler, more generous and gracious at Christmas: I wouldn't trade that for anything. But what a shame to make so much of all the sentiment that we miss what it represents and means. → special responsibility for Christians here.. to go beyond

THe baby in the manger is a lovely tableau, but what it indicates is the magnificient vulnerability of God: that is its secret.

Let's think about that. We have been looking, in recent weeks, at the portion of the Book of the Prophet Isaiah known as Second Isaiah: written by an anonymous author to the Jewish exiles who were living as captives in Babylon. ch 40 ff ("God is about to act redemptively") the prophet told the people - and the figure that emerges as the instrument of God's redemption is the Servant. This part of the Old Testament is important to Christians, particularly in Advent, because Jesus saw his life and ministry in terms of the concept of the Servant. The prophet may not have been predicting the birth of Jesus, but he was coming very close. He was, in fact, describing the way God comes into the life of men - a way that was fulfilled in the life of Jesus Christ.

In any case, I have chosen two readings part of the servant songs to get at this idea of God's vulnerability. In the first passage, from Isaiah 49, the Servant of the Lord is addressing the people: he lists his credentials - ("The Lord called me - he made me mouth like a sharp sword - he said to me "you are my servant'.") But then the mood changes: the servant says, ("I have labored in vain, I have spent my strength for nothing and vanity.')

The passage concludes affirmatively, with the servant acknowledging that his task is validated by God. But that "laboring in vain 'business': that "spending my strength for nothing" = is like a blow to the stomach. One ought to be able to assume that God's special man would be immune to that kind of thing: assured of success in whatever he attempts. The message is clear: God's servant is vulnerable to failure. God will act in a way that can fail...

The point is made even more dramatically in the 50th Chapter. Again the servant is describing himself - this time as a teacher, a gentle rabbi who helps those who are weary. And suddenly, without warning or explanation you see this gentle man surrounded

by a viscious, jeering mob of people: "I gave my back to the smiter.
and my cheeks to those who pulled out
the beard.
I hid not my face from shame and spitting."

Now we see God vulnerable to evil and human sin as well as failure. And we come close at this point to the Biblical doctrine of God and the Christian understanding of Christmas. And it's not an easy one. In fact, it is somewhat of a paradox. God, after all, is Almighty, Eternal, Infinite, Omnipotent. He is the creator of all things, the ruler of the Universe. But here is Isaiah suggesting that he is vulnerable - that his project can fail, that his chosen servant can be surrounded and tormented by a mob: that when the chips are really down God comes out looking weak and powerless. That's what the manger scene really means - weakness, vulnerability. For above the stable, with the cattle lowing and the gentle mother cradeling her baby rises the spectre of a cross, a real crowd jeering at God's servant, spitting on him, pushing a crown of thorns on his head and hanging him on a cross to die.

The Jews and Gentiles could never understand the Gospel of Jesus Christ at this point. Writing to the early church in Corinth, Paul said: "we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and fo-ly to Gentiles." He might have said Christ in a manger, because the idea is the same - weakness, vulnerability. "But", Paul went on, "the weakness of God is stronger than men...God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong."

Now let's be clear that we're talking about real vulnerability - real weakness: not the pretended kind that actually disguieses power and strength. One of the most popular movies several years ago was Billy Jack. Billy Jack was a quite a man, a black belt in Karate, a veteran - who lived as a kind of mountain mystic and gave himself to protecting a shcool for runaway children and Indians against the bigotry of the local residents. It was a good movie: some critics suggested that Billy Jack was a Christ figure because he made himself so vulnerable. But that misses the point: Jesus in the manger and Jesus on the Cross is not pretended weakness. It is real, all-the=way vulnerability. It is the incarnation: God - for our sakes - becoming as vulnerable as any man.

B.J. refused to use his power because his strength was always just under the surface - always a threat

Just as God chose to come among us in Bethlehem stable, and not the nursery of an

oriental potentate's palace - so he chose to live among us in the life of an inconspicuous carpenter instead of a military or political leader. So he commits the continuing tasks of his kingdom to ordinary men and women ("I have labored in vain...I have exhausted myself for nothing.") Many of us could and do say that on occasion. One man put it this way: ("The world eats people for breakfast who stick their necks out very far on behalf of real justice for the human community. It breaks people who work specifically and practically for peace on earth, for compassion toward the poor and oppressed that really would change things. ... You can't beat City Hall! We admire people who stick it out further — who make public heros out of those who hold out to the end - after they have been decently buried and no longer threaten us.")

God choses to be vulnerable. He choses to commit his work to people who are vulnerable. He risks [illegible] "laboring in vain - exhausing oneself for nothing." People who work in the Church know that feeling. Giving themselves to a project that is good and right and in which they believe - and no one cares: no one shows up. "What's the use?" we ask: ("I'm tired of knocking myself out for nothing.") we say: and it's all a part of serving this vulnerable God who chose a manger for his incarnation.

W. H. Auden has a delightful passage in his "Christmas Oratorio": in which Herod the Great speaks about the birth of Jesus.

> "Oh dear, why couldn't this wretched infant be born somewhere else? Why can't people be sensible?. Why can't they see that the notion of a fimite God is absurd? Because it is. And suppose, for the sake of argument, that this story is true. Would it make life any better? ...for me personally it would mean that God had given me the power to destory Himself. I refuse to be taken in. He could not play such a horrible prattical joke."

For Herod the Great, and a lot of people not so great, the vulnerability of God is a bad joke - or it is something they simply cannot comprehend. That God, prposely would be weak: that he would risk failure: in Herod's words "giving people the power to destroy himself" is incredible. It is what the birth of Jesus means.

And we have even more trouble with the second aspect of that vulnerability: that is that God can't operate in the world without encountering the same tragedies as all men.

His man was crucified: his son was killed. Thre is no more real vulnerability than that.

There was a story in the newspaper last week about a man who had been seriously burned for the second time in his life - after years of surgery and recuperating from the first incident. And he said what a lot of us would say under the circumstances: "What does God have against me? Why does God hate me?" We've asked that question - or a variation of it - many times. Even though we've celebrated Christmas for years, and pondered the weak child in a manger, we refuse to learn what it means; namely, that God does not control the forces of evil, that he coexists with tradedy, that he came among us precisely to live our life: to bear with us all the burdens of being human. He is vulnerable with us: he knows what it means to have terrible tradedy befall a loved one.

God took a lot of risks in Bethlehem. He risked the brutality of Herod the Great who slaughtered a lot of innocent babies; he risked family strife; he risked the hatred men have for someone who tells them how to live: he risked the selfishness of men who this Christmas Eve will buy a fifth of wiskey and get gloriously drunk while their children wait at home.

He risked everything. In Jesus Christ he became vulnerable for our sakes. Sooner or later we have to ask "why?" Why did God do it in this way? If he loves us so much, why - starting with his own son doesn't he make things turn out alright?

The answer - the answer spoken eloquently from Bethleham, is that God values our freedom more than anything else. And because of that God choses to appeal to us rather than coerce us: he choses to stand with us in life rather than arranging all thepieces so that ~~we~~ they fall neatly into place.

Charles Peguy wrote aobut freedom in a way that expresses the magnificient vulnerability of God:

"When you once have known what it is to be loved freely,
Submission no longer has any taste.
All the prostrations in the world
Are not worth the beautiful upright attitude of a free man as he kneels.
All the submission, all the dejection in the world
Are not equal in value to the soaring up point,
The beautiful straight soaring up point of one single invocation
From a love that is free."

So God took risks. The Prophet sensed that this is the way God is when he wrote about the servant. So Jesus Christ, his Son, lived our life, was crucified and died our death. And before that was born in a stable behind an inn where nobody that mattered could even see him. So, Almighty God appeals to your heart and mine:

The story of the birth of Jesus Christ is beautiful. So are the sentiments that attend the celebration of Christmas. Listen to it again this year: let it stir your heart: let it overwhelm you with its incredible simplicity. But see in it the real meaning - the magnificient vulnerability of God who wants most of all from you and me

"the beautiful straight soaring up point of one single invocation
From a love that is free." AMEN

Father, as we make our final preparations for Christmas, be present. As we are moved by the good emotions of the season, help us to see the true meaning of the birth. AMEN